Epic TV: Historical Epics on the Small Screen

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The study of historical films, over the course of three decades, has seen important discussions move away from a position of hand-wringing, antagonistic dismissal (such as Paul Smith's dismissal of film as inevitably bad history, and "trivial and ephemeral popular entertainment")[1] to a more nuanced recognition of the essential tension between formal academic history (what Rosenstone notably called "History with a capital H")[2] on the one hand, and its more popular representation in the cinema. Such a tension finds a particularly emphatic expression in the historical epic, a 'genre' which for some epitomises the kind of vulgar, populist fare produced by a Hollywood assembly line, but which has lately seen a resurgence both in popularity (in the explosion of the epic at the twentieth-century box office) and in scholarly interest (notably by Robert Burgoyne, James Russell, Constantine, Santas, Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale).[3]

Nevertheless, despite the excellence of the scholarship on the new epic film—a term I explored in my own edited collection on the epic and which Martin Winkler, among others, dates to the release of *Gladiator*[4]—scant attention has been paid to what happens when those epics move from the widescreen to the smaller screens of television. Such a debate is, I argue, important. It is scarcely anything new to point out that many of the protagonists both behind and in front of the camera have made the leap from cinema to television, but little has been made of the formal factors surrounding such a shift (longer running times, 'complex narratives', debates over 'quality' TV),[5] the ensuing changes in production values, technical or aesthetic factors (higher budgets, improved special effects, improvements in home viewing technologies), or to different viewing patterns of audiences (domestic settings rather than cinemas, catch-up TV and binge-watching, satellite-channel subscriptions versus networks). This paper thus examines the shift from widescreen cinematic epic to small screen series; put simply, I ask what happens if television is able to emulate the 'sense of anticipatory consciousness' which Burgoyne, via Bloch, argues is inherent in the epic film?[6] Using HBO/BBC's *Rome*, Starz' *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, and the BBC's *The Borgias* as brief case studies, I propose to examine the place of historical authority and the role of the popular in a new generation of televisual histories.

KEYWORDS: Epic film, television, history, historical television, historiography

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[1] Paul Smith, *The Historian and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 4.
[2] Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/film and History* (Harlow: Longman/Pearson, 2006), p. 2.
[3] Robert Burgoyne, *The Epic Film in World Culture* (London: Routledge, 2010); James Russell, *The Historical Epic and Contemporary Hollywood : From Dances with Wolves to Gladiator* (New York: Continuum, 2007); Constantine Santas, *The Epic in Film: From Myth to Blockbuster* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010).
[4] *Gladiator: Film and History*, ed. by Martin M Winkler (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 110.
[5] My use of the term 'complex narratives' comes from Jason Mittell, 'Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television', *The Velvet Light Trap*, 58 (2006), 29–40; Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (NYU Press, 2015).
[6] See Burgoyne, p. 6.

Biography

Andrew B.R. Elliott is a Senior Lecturer in Film and Television at the University of Lincoln, UK, where he works on the representation of history in film, television and video games. He is the author of *Remaking the Middle Ages* (2010, analysing medieval cinema), and his recent books include *Playing with the Past* (2013; co-edited with Matthew Wilhelm Kapell) which examines the depiction, simulation and modding of the past in video games, and *The Return of the Epic Film* (2014, which examines the return of the sword and sandals epic in the cinema). He is currently writing his forthcoming book *Medievalism and the Mass Media* (due 2016). He has also published articles and essays on historical film, television and video games, from the classical world to the Middle Ages.